DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 739 HE 026 395

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TITLE Cultural Practices of Female International Students.
PUB DATE 23 Mar 93
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Cultural Differences; Culture Conflict; Data Collection; Females; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; Language Attitudes; Sex Role; *Student Attitudes; *Student Behavior; Student Subcultures; Surveys; *Values
IDENTIFIERS Materialism; University of Texas Austin

ABSTRACT

A study examined cultural practices of female international students at the University of Texas at Austin. Data were collected from 259 students (representing a 24.7 percent response rate) who revealed those aspects of their own culture which the students retained or modified as well as which American practices they borrowed. A two-page questionnaire elicited responses concerning the student's values, norms, language, symbols, and material culture differences, as well as their perceptions of the roles of women in the United States and in the respondent's native cultures. Among findings were that these students' values tended to be conservative, that they were critical of American students' use of English, that they held their own cultural symbols dearly, and that they thought American students too absorbed in materialism and lacking in respect for traditional values and religious conviction. While the students had positive feelings about the role of women in America, they were critical of many American values and attitudes towards women. The study concludes with the observation that, due to the growing presence of female international students, a unique opportunity exists to tap into a source of information vital to cross-cultural communication, global awareness, economic opportunity, and women's literature. (GLR)

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Cultural Practices of Female International Students

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March 23, 1993

IR052395

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Cultural Practices of Female International Students

Each year the number of international students enrolled in American colleges and universities increases steadily. According to Armitage (1991),

> Of the estimated one million foreign students world-wide, almost one-half are studying in the United States alone. While the majority of these students have been male, women are making up an ever increasing proportion of the overseas student population, reaching one in three in 1989-90.

The present study was undertaken at The University of Texas at Austin where the international student population more than doubled from 1,533 in 1974-75 to 3,135 in 1989-90. Despite a slight decline from 1984-85 to 1987-88 triggered by increased tuition costs for these students, the university strongly maintained its position as having the third largest international student population in the nation, headed by Miami-Dade County Community College (5,148) and the University of Southern California (3,767). By 1990-91, 3,571 international students at the University of Texas represented 104 nations in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East, North America, and Oceania (the island nations).

Female students constitute an expanding segment of the total international student population. In 1959-60, women comprised 23.2% of the international student population in American colleges and universities; by 1989-90, the percentage had increased to 33.9% of the total. The number of female international students varies according to type of college or university attended. For example, females represented 44.4%

of the international student population at two-year colleges and 32.5% at four-year colleges in 1989-90. In public colleges and universities, 33.2% of these students were women; 35.5% in private institutions (Zikopoulous, 1990). At The University of Texas at Austin, the 1990-91 international population numbered 3,571 students of which females composed 1048, or 29.3%.

Female international students bring unique cultural practices to the American university campus. Dress, language, and food habits alert the most casual observer to cultural differences. American university students often borrow or adapt foreign practices, e.g. nose rings and ear bands, ethnic dress, and a variety of foods (Chinese, Egyptian, Indian, Vietnamese, etc.). Appreciation for music of other cultures has sparked an international music market with selections available in American music stores, especially those near college campuses. Many of these cultural practices are readily observable while others are less visible.

Knowledge of cultural practices retained, modified, or abandoned by female international students will inform the host community. The need for global awareness must begin with personal perceptions of cultural differences. American students who can appreciate cultural diversity on their campuses will be empowered to participate in a world economy. International students capable of relating their cultural attitudes, beliefs, and practices to their American counterparts may find campus life less stressful and more

cultural attitudes, beliefs, and practices to their American counterparts may find campus life less stressful and more rewarding. The honest and open exchange of cultural differences will accommodate the needs of all students.

The unique position of females in most cultures requires a segregation of empirical data by gender (Armitage, 1991). This is especially true of studies of female international students whose experiences in a foreign society vary qualitatively from those of male students. However, a review of literature revealed little research on these students' practices, the extent to which their cultural habits are retained, or the nature of limitations exacted by the American academic community. Germane to the study are the perceptions and attitudes these students have toward the most basic American societal values, e.g. equal opportunity, achievement and success, activity and work, efficiency and practicality, progress, material comfort, democracy, freedom, racism and group superiority.

Purpose of the study. This study examines some cultural practices of female international students at The University of Texas at Austin. Because no model questionnaire or survey was available, the study attempted to collect data which described in very general terms those aspects of their own culture which the students retained or modified as well as which American practices they borrowed. A questionnaire

was devised to elicit responses about values, norms, language, symbols, and material culture differences.

Methodology. A two-page questionnaire was mailed to female international students attending The University of Texas at Austin in the fall of 1990. The first section collected demographic information: age, educational degree sought, college/school enrollment, length of residence in the United States, perceived level of English proficiency, language spoken away from campus, place of work, housing, cultural composition of the home, typical pattern of cultural interaction, other relatives in the United States, and religious preference.

The second section of the instrument focused on cultural practices of these female international students. Questions examined six issues: retention of cultural practices, modifications of cultural practices, American limitations of own cultural practices, conflicts between own and American cultural practices, perception of female role differences between own and the host culture, and barriers to cross-cultural communications. Questions asked were:

* What aspects of your own society and culture have you retained while attending UT?
* What aspects of American culture have you modified?
* How has American culture limited your own cultural practices?

* What aspects of your culture have you abandoned because they conflict with the American culture?
* What aspects of the American culture have you refused to practice/observe because they are in conflict with your own culture?
* How is the role of women in the American culture different from your own culture?
* What barriers have you found to cross-cultural communication at the university?
* What suggestions do you have for removing those barriers?

Suggested comments included beliefs, values, customs, traditions, religious practices, food, dress, family life, entertainment, and the arts. Questions were open-ended. Respondents were encouraged to attach additional pages for elaboration.

Sample. Of 1048 female international students at The University of Texas at Austin in 1990-91, 261 responded to the survey. Two responses were incomplete or unusable leaving 259 for the study. The 259 responses represent 24.7% of the individuals who received the survey.

Summary of Data. The 259 respondents represent 81 principalities or countries from nine major geographic regions: Africa, Australia, Asian Island Nations, China and Southeast Asia, the Indian Sub-continent, Latin America, the

Middle East, North America, and Western Europe. A majority (138) of women come from seven countries or principalities: Hong Kong (12), India (15), Japan (14), Korea (12), Mexico (18), People's Republic of China (13), and Taiwan (54). The remainder of responses (120) were grouped as "other" for further study.

Nearly half (121, or 47.1%) of these students were 20 to 25 years of age. Fourteen respondents were 19 years old and younger; 76 were 26 to 30 years old; 41 were 31 to 40 years of age, and 5 were 41 and older.

Eighty-six respondents were seeking undergraduate degrees, and 163 were pursuing graduate degrees. (Nine individuals did not respond to this question, and it is possible they were taking courses but not pursuing a degree.) Respondents were enrolled in: Business Administration (55), Liberal Arts (42), Natural Science (40), Education (23), Engineering (23), Nursing (10), Pharmacy (5), and other schools/colleges (61).

A majority (151) of the women had been in the United States from two to five years. Approximately one-third (84) were in their first year of residence; 20 had been in the U.S. from 6 to 10 years; 3 had lived in the country more than 11 years. Most respondents (158) indicated other relatives live in the United States. Of these, 66 shared a home with relatives, 16 had other relatives in the same city, and 76 had relatives in other states. The item was not answered by 99 (38%) respondents.

Two-thirds (172) of the women perceived their English proficiency as advanced, and another 32% believed their English language skills were intermediate. Only one listed her English as beginning, and three did not respond to the question. Away from the university campus, 68 used mostly English, while 84 spoke mostly another language. A mix of English and another language was the choice for 103 respondents. Three persons did not respond to the item.

A majority (132) of the respondents did not work. Of those who worked, 97 were employed on campus, 15 worked off campus, and 14 did not respond. The item on employment was included to complement items about language usage and other forms of social interaction.

The females in this survey tended to live with friends (89) or family (80). A small number lived alone (57) and 30 had some other arrangement. More than half (132) of the respondents lived with members of their own culture group. Some women (45) lived with Americans, and 32 lived with a culture group not her own that did not include Americans. Forty-seven women did not respond to this item.

Patterns of social interaction were largely mixed (169); that is, mingling with one's own group, another culture, and Americans. However, 88 females reported restricted socialization: 53 stayed mostly with members of her own cultural group; 20 mixed mostly with Americans; 8 socialized with a variety including her own, but not

Americans; and 7 preferred other cultures, not her own but not American.

Religious preference was included in the survey for further study. Approximately 47% of the respondents checked Christianity as their preference, 25% listed none, and the remaining 28% were thinly spread over seven other choices.

Based on the data, this cohort may be described as young (76% between 20 and 30 years of age) graduate students (63%). Most (58%) have been in the United States 2-5 years and believe they have good-to-excellent English language skills (98%). Most (61%) have relatives in the United States. The respondents tend to live with family and friends (65%) of their own culture group (51%). Typically, they interact with a mixture of their own, other, and American cultures (65%). A majority (51%) do not work.

Analysis. Data collected in this study could be analyzed in a variety of ways. Because of the paucity of prior research and a need to establish parameters for further study, Williams' (1970) model was selected. According to Williams, the five components of cross-cultural communication are values, norms, language, symbols, and material culture. This paper discusses each of these components as reported by female international students living in an American university environment. Finally, responses to questions about the roles of women in the United States and in the respondents' native cultures are reported.

Values. According to Williams, values reflect ideals of good and bad, beautiful and ugly, desirable and undesirable. Most women in the study claimed to retain basic values gained from their own culture. They refused American drug-use habits (including cigarettes and alcohol) and liberal sexual practices. They described Americans as "dishonest," "hypocritical," and "not serious." They disliked displays of consumerism and materialism which, they commented, promote devotion to waste, fast foods, and exploitation of resources. Descriptors included "greedy" and "wasteful."

As a result of these differences in values, many female students retained their personal practices, e.g. using drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes in moderation or not at all; not participating in casual sex; and buying with cash rather than credit. They often remarked on their own attention to family, an element they found missing in American culture. Other values they retained were privacy, modesty, honesty, understanding, critical thinking, political awareness, and humor. They noted a lack of appreciation for the arts in the United States, e.g. music, dance, and the theatre. They expressed disappointment that Americans care little for reading and prefer social interactions that are passive (watching TV and drinking beer, for example) rather than active, e.g. dancing at parties.

Norms. Williams (1970) stated that norms are those rules and expectations for behaviors that are both prescriptive and proscriptive. Respondents' perceptions of American norms varied greatly from native norms. The women noted that Americans have a different attitude toward punctuality, often arriving late to classes and social events. Further, the choice of entertainment for Americans is passive, e.g., spectator sports. As one respondent summarized differences in social conventions, Americans prefer drugs and sex to dating and dancing. Another thought it unsafe for women to go out alone at night, because there are no "designated areas." Her experience was that American nightclubs (called "meat markets" by locals) dominate the singles scene. In these places, as throughout all American society, pervasive sexism and the double standard permit males to act as macho hunters of females. The absence of singles parties which exist for socializing rather than for pairing further alienates international students who find Americans distant and superficial in their friendships. Several respondents noted that American students refuse to accept foreigners into their social circles.

Language. Williams (1970) observed that language is a standard form of communication for the transmission of cultural norms. Differences in norms may be exacerbated by differences in oral expression. Many female international students retain their language and criticize Americans for

their usage of the English language. Female respondents especially disliked American slang, cursing, and informal ("disrespectful") language. Many described American communication as superficial, condescending, and boastful, e.g. displaying an attitude of superiority. They protested some questions from strangers as being inappropriately personal. For many respondents, one coping mechanism for the communication gap was to remain with members of her own culture as much as possible. Several students indicated membership in a native culture group that met regularly. Although language is a natural barrier to cross-cultural communication, specific criticisms of American student language point to a major obstacle in student interactions.

Symbols. According to Williams (1970), symbols have a particular meaning and acceptance by the culture; for example, dress, gestures and posture, ritual meals, and holidays. The international students held cultural symbols dear, frequently including them in descriptions of "retained aspects." Most often cited was native dress. Several noted that Americans dress more informally than they do at home. Among items most frequently protested were blue jeans, tee shirts, tennis shoes, and "fads." One respondent characterized American fashion as "casual, cheap K-Mart." Other cultural symbols which differed from respondents' native symbols included smiling, forms of salutation,

walking on the left, retaining one's name upon marriage, wearing makeup, and observing holidays.

Material culture. Williams' definition of material culture designated "things" such as cars, television, and telephones. Respondents found Americans addicted to fast foods, TV, telephones, and cars. One mentioned the frustration of talking to telephone answering machines. Americans appear to these international students to rely on makeup and "mindgames" rather than religion and philosophy to affirm personal worth. Dependence on mass media, especially soap operas, lends a superficial patina to the American culture. Respondents felt that Americans avoid serious deliberation of societal problems such as the corruption of capitalism, erosion of the work ethic, disintegration of the family, lack of respect for elders, an absence of religious convictions, and inequality of the sexes. They cited American materialism as a negation of traditional values resulting in an absence of the critical examination needed to uphold them.

Roles of women. The survey of female international students at The University of Texas at Austin revealed both positive and negative aspects of women's roles in the United States. Many respondents wrote favorably of opportunities, both personal and professional, available to women in this country. They viewed the career orientation of Americans in

general as an asset to women in particular. This was seen to have ramifications for greater autonomy among females. Respondents observed greater independence, sometimes stated as "self-determination," among American women. They noted that the broad range of choices available to women was not true in their home countries, and that American females are more active "outside the home."

Another positive aspect of roles assumed by American women was described as part of liberal societal values regarding premarital sex. Americans tolerate emotional and sexual independence in both sexes and accept single women as a norm. Respondents cheered perceived equality with males for the higher status it seems to accord females. American women were described as "outspoken on public issues," "more emancipated," and more respected.

Female international students who responded were, nevertheless, critical of many American values and attitudes toward women. While they appreciated women's improved status in the United States, many cited more stress resulting from higher expectations. The women observed that American females have more alternatives in the workplace, but less success and fewer promotions than their male counterparts. In addition, working American women usually dress within a sexual connotation that is professionally and personally limiting.

The other side of "autonomy" revealed serious flaws. Respondents suggested that American working women feel a

need to "prove something" and are driven to "want it all." They viewed American females as suffering conflict within themselves and among their families and colleagues. Many American women seem to be apologetic about their own success and ambivalent about their roles, i.e. fiercely protective of their independence while remaining highly dependent on men for affirmation.

Values that allow sexual and marital freedom were seen as socially destructive. A number of female respondents disliked early dating patterns among American youth citing problems of poor social development, premature sexual liaisons, and loss of romance in male-female relationships. The heavy American emphasis on selection of a mate from the proper socioeconomic status appears to override academic achievement for American women. Their international peers, whose purpose at the university is to obtain an education, decry the poor academic standards of these American females.

Foreign female students were especially harsh in their criticisms of "equality" for women in the United States. They found women to be "oppressed everywhere." One insightful note described American females, "[they] exploit each other in very sophisticated ways." American males were seen as "appearing" nonsexist while being, in fact, "very sexist." American women are viewed as sex objects disdained on professional and personal levels. A double standard exists in a society that divides males and females educationally with females being directed toward traditional

American university students. Respondents referred often to "racism," explicated as the American caste system, American nationalism, and ethnocentrism. Their need to distance themselves from American students in order to observe their own cultural practices speaks to a larger need for cross-cultural communication at the campus level.

The growing number of international students in the United States argues for programs and courses that address cultural differences. American students need to appreciate diversity of values, norms, language, symbols, and material culture. All students must contribute to shared knowledge. Within the international student population, females represent an underserved component with gender-based needs. Their place in the academic community can be assured by greater understanding of culturally-derived feminine practices. College campuses can encourage awareness of gender differences among international students through improved cross-cultural interaction and communication.

Implications for the research community. This study discloses a need for other collections of raw data on female international students on college and university campuses. The unique sociological cohort represents an untapped source of information vital to cross-cultural communication, global awareness, economic opportunity, and women's literature. Data gathered in this study provides ample opportunity for research in educational anthropology, multicultural education,

international education, sociology of women, and social psychology.

Armitage (1991) notes that few existing studies of international students "focus on women exclusively." Research in this important field will provide useful information for universities seeking to recruit and retain foreign students. States and federal agencies wishing to expand academic opportunities for women can utilize the data. Support groups can focus on issues central to women's needs in a foreign society.

The growing presence of female international students on American campuses portends greater awareness and appreciation of human similarity and diversity. This presence affords new avenues for enlightened communication across boundaries marked by gender and culture. The door is open to researchers everywhere.

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